

Reaching Our Standards: Improving Student Competencies in Using the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms in Preparation for Pastoral Ministry

Reformed churches are confessional churches. Presbyterians throughout the world adopt as their confession the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms (collectively known as the Westminster Standards), composed by the Westminster Assembly that met from 1643 to 1648. Confessional churches are still committed to the Reformation principle of *sola Scriptura*: the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the only infallible rule of faith and practice. It is the *primary* standard of the church to which Presbyterian ministers and elders are to submit. They also subscribe to *subordinate* standards, which include the Westminster Standards (Confession of Faith and Larger and Shorter Catechisms).

Reformed Theological Seminary, as a school that especially serves Reformed and Presbyterian churches, is a confessional seminary. Since its founding in 1966, RTS has stressed the theology of the Westminster Standards in its curriculum. So why a QEP on the Westminster Standards? Graduates have demonstrated a general competency in the Standards, but it is less clear that their studies have equipped them to *practice* the Standards in their ministry. Seminary instruction helps them to pass ordination exams, but is it providing *confessional formation* for ministry? The Steering Committee has identified this formation in the Westminster Standards as an area of potential improvement, and this is where it seeks to focus the attention of the QEP.

In this QEP, RTS is renewing its commitment to the heart of its mission. “Reaching our Standards” is its collaborative effort to integrate the study of the Westminster Standards more consistently in its Master of Divinity curriculum. This plan expects that MDiv graduates from all campuses will:

1. Demonstrate knowledge of the Westminster Standards,
2. Understand the role of the subordinate standards in the life and witness of a healthy church, and
3. Develop competencies in employing the Westminster Standards in the work of pastoral ministry.

This plan will be accomplished through several curricular initiatives including additional lecture hours and enhanced attention to the Standards in many MDiv courses (especially pastoral theology courses). Five MDiv courses will produce related artifacts for assessment purposes. RTS will measure the success of the QEP on an annual basis, over a five-year implementation period, through direct and indirect measures, including student entrance and exit surveys and juried reviews of course artifacts.

RTS believes that this plan will play a vital role in improving its confessional formation for ministry, preparing its ministers-to-be to subscribe whole-heartedly to the Westminster Standards, and equipping them to use the Westminster Standards more effectively in worship, prayer, preaching, discipleship, and counseling.